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From High Skill to High School: The Social Organization of “Canadian Work Experience”, Immigration, and Volunteer Work

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Abstract: This thesis addresses the labour market integration of new immigrant professionals to Ontario, and critically examines the role that formal education plays in this process. Employing Smith’s (2006) institutional ethnography, I examine the social organization of adult co-op programs offered by Ontario District School Boards.

How does it happen that in the quest for “Canadian work experience” a woman with a master’s degree, years of international work experience, and an extremely high proficiency in English, ends up in a Canadian co-op high school program working for 11 weeks in a major bank as a teller for no pay? Each year more than 6,000 immigrant professionals in Ontario go through high school co-op programs in the hopes that the work placement will provide an opportunity for them to re-enter their professions. The courses offer Canadian work experience—which immigrants are told by employers they need—and grant high school credits, which are of little value to immigrant professionals who often have graduate degrees from abroad. While the work placements that immigrants make may be useful in getting jobs or making connections, the argument of this paper is that because the programs are guided by the mandate and policies of the Ministry of Education, they fundamentally cannot meet the needs of immigrant professionals.

Drawing on the methodological and ontological orientations of institutional ethnography (Smith, 2006), I investigate how the social organization of Canadian work experience, enacted through the actions of numerous people in different locations, produces the inclusion of highly skilled immigrants in particular labour market positions, specifically, as unpaid volunteer workers. I argue that as an ideological construction, Canadian work experience functions both to regulate immigrant professionals’ access to the labour market and produce immigrants as workers deficient in the necessary skills for the Canadian labour market. Canadian work experience acts as a marker of difference in a system of classification whereby immigrants, because of their (obvious) lack of Canadian work experience are deemed inferior to other workers. The result of this classification is the growing racialization of the labour market with immigrants, and especially immigrants of colour, over represented in low skilled, low paid jobs despite their educational credentials and international work experience. In the case of the co-op programs, racialized immigrants are transformed into high school students working without pay.

Recent immigrants, in particular, face greater economic hardship than their Canadian-born counterparts in the past (Reitz, 2005) and “Canadian work experience” requirements have been described by many as the most difficult barrier to employment for newcomers (Schellenberg & Maheux, 2007). In the immigration selection criteria, work experience accounts for 21 per cent of the total, however, this work experience is generally not from Canada. By classifying immigrants as “lacking in Canadian work experience” immediately upon their arrival, immigrants are reclassified from “highly skilled” migrants to deficient jobseekers. Research has shown that although new immigrants have higher levels of education than their Canadian-born cohorts, they are more likely to work in low-status, low paying jobs (Galabuzi, 2006; Jackson, 2002; Li, 2001;

Ornstein, 2000). Volunteering for Canadian work experience is widely considered to be a necessary part of the migration and settlement process for immigrants (Slade, Luo & Schugurensky, 2005). Data from the National Survey of Volunteering and Giving (Statistics Canada, 2001) reveals that 30 per cent of newer immigrants indicated that their motivation for volunteering was to improve their job opportunities. A range of employment-based programs designed with a volunteer work placement have been developed to address the problem of “lack of Canadian work experience”, including Ontario school boards co-op programs.

This qualitative research study is composed of two components. First, between February 2006 and May 2007, I conducted 14 open-ended interviews with two groups of participants: six “highly skilled” immigrants who volunteered for “Canadian work experience” and eight workers from not-for-profit organizations and school boards who have experience at various levels of administration in programs for immigrants containing a volunteer work placement. The purpose of the interviews with administrators was to gather information beyond the experiences of the immigrants to discover how “Canadian work experience” is organized. The second method of data was a textual analysis of secondary data collection from publicly accessible material, including articles from academic journals, community-based reports, policy documents from school boards and various levels of government.

The Social Organization of School Board Co-op Programs

School boards in Ontario have been offering co-op programs to adolescents for decades. Their goal is to provide young students an opportunity to learn about work first-hand, spending time in an actual workplace while earning credits towards their high school diploma. In the late 1990s, school boards, particularly those in the Greater Toronto area, started extending these high school co-op programs to new immigrants to gain Canadian work experience. “Want to continue the career you had in your home country? Canadian Experience for the career you want. Be true to yourself. Follow your dream!” While the Toronto District School Board’s CanEX (Abbreviation for Canadian Experience) Co-op program encourages potential students to “live their dreams”, the Foreign Trained Professional Co-op of the Dufferin-Peel Catholic School Board asserts that “in the recent school year, 70% of our students found paid jobs after they completed the program”. These programs are popular with immigrants who learn early in their settlement process that they are lacking Canadian work experience.

There are currently at least five school boards offering different versions of co-op programs to immigrants to get Canadian work experience. The Co-op programs, both within and between school boards, have different in-class to work placement ratios. Some programs are structured so that the first three weeks are all in-class instruction followed by a mix of placement and classroom hours; other programs have eight weeks of in-class instruction followed by 11 weeks of full time (40 hours per week) placement. Student selection criteria varies slightly among programs; in general, to qualify a person must be an immigrant, over 21 years of age, be able to attend on a full time basis, have a certain level of proficiency in English, a work permit, a health card, a completed resume and enough money to cover the fees and living expenses for the duration of the course. The enrolment of the programs also varies widely; the Toronto District School Board through its five co-op programs enrolls approximately 2,400 students per year while the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board enrolls over 3,000 students (Smits, 2007). The students pay assessment, student activity and materials fees for the courses that total, on average, \$110.

All of the participants in my study indicated that the curriculum of the Co-op program did not meet their needs. Golnaz, for example, had previously taken a Job Search Workshop in which she spent three days with an employment counsellor revising her resume and cover letter. When she was not exempted from this two week section of the Co-op curriculum, she felt her time was wasted:

And at the beginning they start again repeating how you have to organise your resume. I had just done that in another course. They didn't have anything for me to do. They only changed the format because everything was set up there, so if I for example wrote the title on the right side they shifted it to the left side. Nothing was new there. *But they had to go through those process.* (emphasis added).

This comment, "they had to go through those processes" is a perfect point to begin tracing the social organization of the program. What processes is she referring to? Why did the teachers have to go through unnecessary course content? Golnaz's observation points to a rigidity in the Co-op curriculum and an inability of the teachers to adapt the curriculum to the actual needs of the group. During my interviews with the Co-op teachers, I asked them about how they determined the curriculum for the Co-op program and they pointed me to an Ontario Ministry of Education document, "Cooperative Education and Other Forms of Experiential Learning: Policies and Procedures for Ontario Secondary Schools" (2000). This document outlines the principles, guidelines, criteria, and administrative responsibilities for cooperative education courses. Upon close examination of the policy, I realized that this policy document applies to all co-op programs, both for adolescent high school students and adults in the for-credit day programs. Despite the fact that the high school program has been extended to serve a very different client group, immigrant professionals, no modifications to curriculum, policies or procedures have been made by the school boards. With respect to the curriculum, one Co-op teacher reported:

In the Co-op program, the students [immigrant professionals] get four high school credits. *They are identical to the credits that the kids get* so sometimes I have a parent who is in my class, and he's got a 17-year-old kid in the regular system and they're both taking the [grade 11] Designing Your Future credit (emphasis added).

For immigrants with university degrees and professional experience, two problems arise out of the curriculum requirements: (1) the content of the academic courses is not relevant; and (2) the length of the program is too long. First, the academic portion of the program is not relevant to immigrant job-seekers. This is not to say that learning about the Canadian parliamentary system or Canadian poetry is not important (for new immigrants as well as Canadian born and educated people), however, in the context of the programs promising to help immigrants get re-established in their professions, these courses are not a valuable use of time. Because of the program design, immigrants have no choice but to sit through these courses to have the opportunity of doing the work placement; according to one participant, "it is the price of admission". There is an internal logic to the co-op program when applied to a grade 11 student, but this logic falls apart when dealing with "students" who are adults with years of schooling and work experience. The high school credits are not meaningful to people with one or more university degrees and the positioning of these programs within the high school curriculum necessarily renders highly skilled immigrants into entry level, inexperienced students.

Secondly, while it is obvious to the students that in order to go on a placement they need to go through specific curriculum, it is not obvious to them that the Ministry of Education policy also determines the length of the course. The co-op guidelines state that the work placements have to be accompanied by related academic courses so in order for a school to offer a four credit

co-op placement, the program has to include two different in-school courses. The hours of the program have to include time for pre-placement, integration and placement. According to the policy, “a course based on two related full-credit courses may be scheduled for no less than 110 hours and no more than approximately 440 hours” (p. 29). Longer programs are deemed desirable for students as “they afford the additional learning time at the placement that is often necessary to enable students to gain the practical experience and the practice they need to fully achieve course expectations” (p. 29). While this structure makes sense for youth who take the co-op program as part of their high school schedule, for immigrants trying to get into the labour market, the courses are too long; immigrants are forced to live off of their savings during the 18 to 20 weeks of the co-op program.

The high school programs are organized under a set of institutional practices geared toward the education of youth, and they do not meet the needs of adult immigrant “students”/jobseekers. The adolescents use the co-op programs to learn about the workplace, to explore a potential career and to get some experience in the workplace. For immigrant professionals, they need an efficient way to learn about local customs in their profession; they already know about the world of work.

Same Program, Different Work Organization

There is one critical difference, however, between the co-op programs for adolescents and adult immigrants; the adolescent program is part of the regular school stream and the other is part of the Continuing Education stream. The funding and working conditions for the teachers are very different in Continuing Education, despite the fact that they have to deliver the same program. With the introduction of Bill 160 in 1999, adult education in Ontario was entirely reconfigured. All adult education programs including Adult day school for credit courses such as co-op, were re-organized under the Continuing Education framework with a different set of administrative processes from the regular high school stream. Previous to this policy change, adult day students in credit programs were funded at the same rate as adolescent high school students; Bill 160 dramatically cut the funding for adult students to approximately one-third of its former value.

The working conditions for the teachers in the Adult day schools were also radically altered. Under the Continuing Education stream, the teachers have vastly different working conditions from teachers who are in the regular high school stream. They work on nine week contracts, are paid hourly for classroom time only, receive a lower hourly wage and have larger class sizes than teachers in the regular system. According to one Continuing Education teacher:

In the con-ed stream, we are not part of the regular high school system. We have a different pay scale - we get paid only for the hours we put in. There are some benefits, but they're not exactly identical to the benefits that the regular teachers get. For example, the teachers would be paid sort of on a pro-rated basis for 12 months. We're paid only for the months that we work. So if we don't work in the summer, we're not paid. It makes it a little tight.

For teachers in the regular stream, the co-op class sizes are set between 22 and 26 students, they have unassigned time for preparation and marking as well as a set maximum number of periods for student mentoring. The Continuing Education teachers have no paid preparation time and there are no negotiated limits on class size. Because the funding of the Continuing Education Adult Day Schools (a set amount per hour per student) is entirely different from the funding of the regular school (a set amount for a full time student), this drives different

enrolment and working conditions for the teachers and as a result the class size for co-op is often double or triple that in the regular classes. The teachers are obliged to find and closely monitor placements for the co-op students, yet because adult education is devalued and underfunded, the ability of the teachers to deliver the programs to function as laid out in policy is compromised. It might be possible for a teacher in the regular stream to manage each student's co-op placement in their classes that have a maximum of 26 students but it is difficult to manage for the co-op teachers in the Adult day schools who often have 80 to 100 students in their classes. The responsibility to find placements, then, is downloaded onto the student. Because the co-op programs are 18 weeks long and the teachers' contracts are only nine weeks, there is constant stress on the teacher about the number of students in the program; if the numbers fall below a certain threshold (set by administration), then the course can be cancelled at the nine week point. In the report, "Ontario Learns: Strengthening Our Adult Education System", by the Ministry of Education (2005), it is noted that the precarious working conditions for the teachers of the Continuing Education have impacted the program delivery: "The low pay and the uncertain employment future mean that educators leave, and administrators find it hard to recruit new educators to what is viewed as a "second-class" teaching environment" (p. 33).

In addition to the curriculum and funding issues, the mandate of the Ministry of Education creates another set of institutional work practices that work against the interests of immigrant professionals. Because the co-op programs are structured within the Ministry of Education and fall within the education framework, they fundamentally cannot meet the needs of immigrant professionals. The co-op programs are governed by a set of institutional guidelines and practices that are geared toward the education of children and youth. All Ministry of Education programs are framed around education as an outcome, not employment; schools need to report on the number of credits granted and the number of pupil hours, not the number of people employed through their programs.

Concluding Comments

The economic impact of the program is substantial, yet because it is subsumed under the educational mandate, it is invisible. In terms of labour value, assuming that the school boards across the province have 6,000 students completing the Co-op program each year completing an average of 32 hours of volunteer work for 10 weeks on placement, this would total 1,920,000 hours of volunteer work, or the equivalent of 923 full time jobs. At minimum wage (\$8.75), the value of this labour is \$16,800,000 in unpaid wages.

None of the participants I interviewed were able to re-establish their professional practices by enrolling in the co-op program. In my interviews with teachers, however, I heard stories of adult educators going well beyond the call of duty to help an immigrant professional get a footing in the labour market. I do not mean to negate these success stories or to critique the hard work of the co-op teachers, but to highlight the intrinsic conflict between the intentions of the teachers and the required institutional practices of the school board. Since funding requirements determine work practices (Ng, 1996), the teacher's time and energy is focused on administering a learning experience with high school credits as the outcome, not on securing meaningful employment for the immigrants. Regardless of the intention and efforts of the teachers, by going through the curriculum of the program, they "activate the texts [policy, curriculum] in the service of the organization" (Campbell and Gregor, 2002, p. 34). Examining how the mandate, crystallized in policy, limits the effectiveness of the co-op program is important because it shows how immigrant professionals are actively classified as high school students, positioned for entry-level

precarious employment, and as a result experience downward class mobility and de-professionalization.

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